

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON CONSUMER CONFIDENCE REPORTS (CCRs)

### GENERAL QUESTIONS

**Q. What is a consumer confidence report (CCR)?**

**A.** A CCR is an annual report on drinking water quality that community public water suppliers must deliver to their customers. The first report is due October 19, 1999 for the year 1998. Subsequent reports are due July 1 for the previous year. These reports are mandated by the federal Safe Drinking Water Act. The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is the state agency authorized to implement and enforce drinking water mandates such as the CCR rule.

**Q. Who has to file a CCR?**

**A.** All community public water systems (PWS) are required to prepare and provide to their customers annual consumer confidence reports on the quality of their drinking water. A community public water system is defined as a public water system that serves at least 15 connections used by year round residents or regularly serves at least 25 year round residents. These reports will allow consumers to make personal health-based decisions regarding their water consumption. In Massachusetts there are 519 community PWS.

**Q. How is the average citizen supposed to interpret or use the data in the CCR or water quality report?**

**A.** The report should say whether or not the water meets federal and state standards for safe drinking water. The presence of a particular ingredient does not mean that the water is unsafe to drink. However, if something is detected above the recommended level, the PWS must discuss the potential health effects, and actions taken to correct the problem.

People who have special health problems, immune deficiencies, or pregnant women should check with their primary care physician or health care provider if contaminants are detected in concentrations that are above the standard (MCL).

**Q. Who is responsible for ensuring that the local water supplier is reporting the truth?**

**A.** If a contaminant exceeds the standard (MCL), the PWS must notify their consumers about the potential health effects, and what they must do until the problem is solved. The DEP must be notified. DEP reviews all violations and reports to ensure accurate and truthful reporting.

**Q. How can consumers get additional information on their public drinking water?**

**A.** A consumer should contact their PWS directly if they want more information on their local public water system. Fact sheets on drinking water, contaminants and health effects, and public education materials are available on the DEP and EPA web site. Citizens may also call the EPA Safe Drinking Water Hotline at 800.426.4791.

DEP: [www.state.ma.us/dep](http://www.state.ma.us/dep)

EPA: [www.epa.gov/safewater/](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/)

**Q. If a substance is detected and reported in the CCR, does that mean the water is unsafe to drink?**

A. No, detecting a substance does not necessarily mean the water is unsafe to drink. When concentrations of substances in the water exceed certain health-based standards, the DEP determines the potential for health impacts and orders the system to notify its consumers and take corrective actions. Corrective actions can include the use of an alternative source, treatment or boiling.

**Q. Are the reports available in different languages?**

A. Systems that have 25% or more of a particular population that speak a language other than English **must** translate the CCR into that language. Chelsea, Fall River, Holyoke, Lawrence, and New Bedford must do a complete CCR translation. Fifty-one additional municipalities must state the importance of the CCR in languages used in their community.

**Q. Why do consumers need to have this information? What does DEP hope the outcome will be?**

A. Most environmental laws have a consumer right-to-know component. The Safe Drinking Water Act Amendments of 1996 included several consumer right-to-know provisions. The Consumer Confidence Report Rule is the one with the most impact on community public water suppliers. These reports will discuss the local drinking water quality and their PWS's compliance with the federal standards for safe drinking water.

DEP hopes that people will realize that public drinking water must meet stringent standards. DEP hopes these reports will lead to better communication between the supplier and the consumer, and the consumer will know who to contact if they have problems.

**Q. Is there anything individuals can do to protect their drinking water?**

A. Yes, consumers can get involved in local water supply protection committees or watershed associations that work to protect both drinking water and natural resources. Additionally, a consumer can find out if their town has a local bylaw or health regulation that restricts land uses in recharge areas of wells and/or reservoirs. Local government has a role in protecting and conserving drinking water. DEP encourages participation in the local planning process and adoption of local regulations that limit threatening land uses in recharge areas of public water sources.

**Q. Do people that have private wells need to have their water tested?**

A. Private wells are regulated by the local Board of Health (BOH). At a minimum, well owners should have private wells tested annually for bacteria and nitrates. In addition, DEP has a recommended list of contaminants and testing frequencies for private wells. Contact the Drinking Water Program at 617.292.5770 for this listing. However, the BOH may have existing regulations that require homeowners to test for additional substances. If a community wishes to pass a BOH regulation, they should consult DEP's guidance, *Private Well Guidelines, DEP, 1989*. This is available at the state bookstore in Boston and Springfield, and may be ordered through their Web site: [www.state.ma.us/sec/spr](http://www.state.ma.us/sec/spr).

**Q. Can a consumer improve the taste of water with a home water treatment device?**

A. To some consumers, public drinking water sometimes looks, smells or tastes funny. This may be caused by a heavy algae bloom on the reservoir supplying the water, or excess iron or manganese that has accumulated in the lines that deliver water to the home. While these substances may affect the water's appearance, smell or taste, they are not harmful to one's health. Home treatment devices, such as filters, may improve the taste, but they can breed bacteria if they are not properly maintained.

Before investing in a treatment device, consumers can chill tap water from a public water system. Most people find this helps improve the taste. Consumers should also contact their water supplier to determine whether or not the taste is due to a short-term occurrence. Consumers who decide to purchase a filter should contact the NSF, 800.NSF.MARK, to see if the model will remove the particular substance causing the taste problem.

Consumers who wish to have their water tested must choose a laboratory certified to analyze for the particular chemical. It is against the law for anyone but a state-certified lab to test your drinking water for bacteria or regulated chemicals. See DEP's Web site for a listing of certified laboratories: [www.state.ma.us/dep](http://www.state.ma.us/dep).

**Q. Is bottled water safer to drink than public drinking water?**

A. To some consumers, bottled water may taste better than the water that comes out of your tap, but it is a lot more expensive and is not necessarily "healthier". Bottled water is regulated as a food, by the Food and Drug Administration. Water bottled in Massachusetts is regulated by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and has to meet public drinking water standards. The DEP assists DPH in approving sources in Massachusetts. However, bottled water companies do not have to produce annual Consumer Confidence Reports.

For more information, contact the DPH at 617.983.6700, the Safe Drinking Water Hotline, 800.426.4791, or the EPA Web site, [www.epa.gov/safewater/](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/). For a survey of bottled water companies, contact the National Resources Defense Council at 212.727.2700, or visit their Web site, [www.nrcd.org](http://www.nrcd.org).

**Q. Should MA residents be worried about lead in their tap water?**

A. Lead pipes were used to connect homes to water mains in Massachusetts until 1940, and lead solder was used to join copper pipes until the state banned it in 1986. Some homes may still have excessive levels of lead at the tap. Since lead can be especially harmful to children, it is important to take the proper steps to minimize exposure. Visit DEP's website for the brochure "*Is There Lead in My Tap Water?*" or call 617.292.5770.

**Q. What are "total coliforms"? What are "fecal coliforms"?**

A. Total coliforms include several types of bacteria, common in the environment and are generally not harmful themselves. However, the presence of these bacteria in drinking water generally means there is a problem with water treatment or the distribution pipes, and indicates that the water may be contaminated with organisms that can cause disease.

The presence of fecal coliforms in drinking water is serious because they are usually associated with sewage or animal wastes and are infectious to humans. Your water system routinely tests for these bacteria. If EPA's safety standards for these contaminants are exceeded, your system will act to correct the problem and, in the interim, issue an alert with guidance on how to protect yourself and your family.

**Q. What can be done about water with a strong chlorine smell?**

A. Each individual responds differently to the smell and taste of drinking water. Some find chlorination in various concentrations renders the water distasteful. To make the water more

palatable, expose it to the air for a few hours, or pour it from one clean container to another before chilling.

**Q. Generally, how does MA drinking water compare to that of other states, countries?**

A. Every day, more than six million Bay Staters turn on the tap and take a drink of water from a public supply. Some of those people worry that their water might not be safe. Considering how often they are exposed to news reports about water-borne illnesses and commercials on bottled water, that's understandable. But, the public water supplies in Massachusetts are among the best in the country, and they are subject to the most stringent government standards in the world.

STANDARDS/TESTING

**Q. How safe is drinking water in MA?**

A. Very safe. Both the U.S.EPA and the MA Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) have very stringent standards that ensure public drinking water is safe. DEP requires your local water supplier to perform ongoing tests for the presence of bacteria, lead and other heavy metals, herbicides and pesticides, and industrial solvents. If contaminants exceed the MCL standards, the water supplier is required to notify consumers through local newspapers, or radio stations. If bacteria or chemicals pose a threat to public health, the water supply is treated to remove the contaminants or taken out of service until a solution is found.

**Q. Who sets the standards for public drinking water, how often are they changed or updated?**

A. The U.S. EPA develops national standards after extensive research and input from states, scientists, public water suppliers, and the general public. The federal Safe Drinking Water Act and its amendments were passed by the U.S. Congress to ensure all public drinking water meets public health standards. In MA, DEP is the agency authorized to ensure that all PWS meet the federal standards such as testing for 80 contaminants in drinking water. States may choose to set stricter standards; however, all states must have standards at least as stringent as EPA's. MA DEP's Office of Research and Standards develops guidelines for chemicals that do not have MCLs.

The U.S. Congress requires EPA to publish a list of contaminants that may require regulations every five years starting in 1998. Every five years, EPA is required to decide whether or not to regulate five contaminants from the list based on adverse health effects, national occurrence and several other factors.

**Q. What is the difference between and MCL (maximum contaminant level) and an MCLG (maximum contaminant level goal) in terms of public health?**

A. MCLs are enforceable numerical limits that restrict the concentration of specific contaminants in the nation's drinking water. An MCLG is a non-enforceable goal derived solely from health effects data. An MCL is set as closely as possible to the MCLG, taking technology and costs into the account.

**Q. How often is a local water supply tested to ensure the water complies with the standards?**

A. Public water systems must test all sources of water on a regular basis. Most systems test for over 80 contaminants as scheduled by DEP. The schedule depends on past testing results and the federal requirements. If a system does detect a contaminant above the MCL, additional monitoring and

testing is required. Regional offices of DEP inspect these systems on a regular basis and ensure that systems comply with the testing and notification requirements.

**Q. Is DEP the agency responsible for ensuring that local water supplies do meet the standards set by the federal government?**

A. Yes, DEP has primacy to conduct the drinking water program in MA. DEP also ensures the PWS comply with the standards and takes enforcement action when necessary.

#### RISK / PUBLIC HEALTH

**Q. When should someone with an immune-syndrome deficiency be concerned if their water exceeds certain standards?**

A. People with weakened immune systems should contact their health care provider if MCLs are exceeded for microbiological contaminants such as *Cryptosporidium*, *E.coli* and *Giardia*.

**Q. Should people be advised to contact their medical doctors if they feel they have a health problem that might be related to something in the drinking water?**

A. Yes, the medical community is knowledgeable about the effect of common contaminants found in water, such as bacteria. A person who is immuno-compromised, pregnant, undergoing dialysis or chemotherapy, or sensitive to chemicals may want to check with their doctor or health care provider.

**Q. How can a consumer find out more about the health impacts of certain ingredients or contaminants in their drinking water?**

A. There are numerous drinking water related sites on the Internet. However, the best sources for health related fact sheets are the DEP Office of Research and Standards, the Safe Drinking Water Hotline at 800.426.4791, and the consumer's local Board of Health. Fact sheets are also accessible on the U.S. EPA Web site: [www.epa.gov/safewater/](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/).

**Q. What are the common contaminant problems here in MA that might cause a public health problem? (*E.coli*, *Giardia*, *Cryptosporidium*)**

**A.** *E.coli* is a common bacterium found in all animals, including humans. When it is found in water, it is usually associated with fecal matter, and indicates there could be a public health problem. *Giardia* is a parasite carried by beavers and other mammals. It is only found in surface water supplies. If there is a possibility that *Giardia* is present, the system must test for this organism. *Cryptosporidium* is a parasite commonly found in lakes and rivers, especially when the water is contaminated with sewage and animal wastes. It is very resistant to disinfection, and even an well-operated water treatment system cannot ensure that drinking water will be completely free of this parasite. EPA is working on specific standards for this contaminant.

Immune-compromised people and people with gastrointestinal diseases who wish to take extra precautions should consult their health care provider about measures to reduce risk of *Cryptosporidium*, *Giardia*, and bacterial infections. Boiling water is one way of removing *Cryptosporidium* and bacteria. Point of use treatment devices might be considered. See EPA 's fact sheet *Guidance for People with Severely Weakened Immune Systems*, on the EPA Web site.

**Q.What is a boil water alert?**

**A.** If a boil water alert is issued in a community, it means the PWS has discovered one or more microbiological contaminants at levels exceeding those allowed by EPA. The boil water alert is a temporary advisory to protect public health. The PWS must take appropriate corrective action, continue to monitor its water supply, and notify customers when it has remedied the problem. The local PWS should be able to provide more details, or a consumer can check the EPA fact sheets on contaminants.

**Q. If something is detected and reported, should consumers consider putting in home treatment/filtering units? Does DEP approve home treatment devices?**

**A.** A violation of an MCL occurs when the contaminant levels exceed the MCL for the contaminant. If treatment does not eliminate the problem, the source is taken off line and an alternative source of water would be supplied by the local public water system. In most cases, a system has several sources of water such groundwater from wells to use in the event another source is closed. Generally, it is not necessary to put in a home treatment unit if you are on a public water system. Neither the U.S.EPA nor the DEP approve home treatment units. Contact the NSF at 800.NSF.MARK for their listing of treatment units for specific contaminants.

**Q.What is an acceptable level of risk?**

**A.** Both the U.S. EPA and the MA DEP set maximum contaminant levels (MCLs) for all substances/contaminants that are known to impact health. These MCLs consider both cancer and non-cancer effects and are developed to protect sensitive individuals.

**Q. Are there any positive benefits to chemicals such as chlorine, fluoride and other compounds added in the treatment process?**

**A.** Disinfection is needed to destroy harmful bacteria in the water. Fluoride was an ingredient added after extensive research showed it would help inhibit tooth decay. Other compounds are used to treat the physical parameters such as taste, color, color, turbidity (cloudiness), and alkalinity. These compounds are used at levels that have been scientifically determined to have no significant impact on public health. The use of these compounds is strictly regulated.